

# Castlemaine Naturalist

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Eastern Grass Owls, North Qld. ph -Noel Young

## A Discourse on Owls

How many of us have the enthusiasm to endure cold and windy nights perched precariously in a tower waiting, often in vain, for the moment to arrive – the chance to get that one excellent photo?. Not to mention having to climb rope ladders to considerable heights, and the possibility of being attacked by a determined nest defender with razor sharp claws. Those strange and enigmatic creatures, the birds of the night, were the subject of David Hollands' address at last months meeting. His coverage of the topic was thorough, reflecting a considerable amount of field work, and some astute observations.

To properly photograph an owl in the wild is a formidable task. To have assembled a collection of outstanding photographs of all the Australian species is nothing short of amazing. David's most recent book (Owls, Frogmouths and Nightjars of Australia, 2008) is actually his third on the subject of Owls, and is a revision of the first (published in 1991) covering all 17 Australian species. It is a copious work, detailing his memorable encounters with each species in turn, and adding many insights into their behaviour and abilities. Most of the photographs shown on the meeting night are reproduced in this book, and David recounted some of the stories associated with them.

One of the standouts to me was the cute and curious little Christmas Island Hawk Owl, a bird I knew nothing about. Not surprising since little was known about it until 1994 when Richard Hill began two years of study for Birds Australia. While he was there David visited and was able to photograph a pair which seemed attracted by his presence, even putting on an exhibition of mating for the camera, which settled speculation as to which was the male!

The Powerful Owl was of particular interest, since I became aware about three years ago that at least one is a regular visitor to our Botanical Gardens. In that year they had bred there, and a photo of a chick had appeared in the local paper. A few weeks later, I was doing my constitutional around the track late in the afternoon, when not far from the playground I was distracted by a strange repetitious call I could not recognise. Following the sound I moved toward the creek and was suddenly confronted with four staring eyes – a female and juvenile perched together just above head height. I experienced the naked feeling photographers get when coming across a rare photo - op with no camera!



Barking Owl

photo – Noel Young

Tales of the Barking Owl reminded me of an unforgettable experience at the age of 15, when I was first persuaded by more intrepid school friends to take up bushwalking. Camping deep in the Otway ranges one night, feeling as remote from humanity as I had ever been then, we heard a blood - curdling scream from not far away. After the initial shock, and given our isolation, I assumed it was some sort of animal, but was told some time after the event that it

must have been the relatively rare call of the Barking Owl, known to earlier pioneers as the “screaming woman owl”

Great photos of the relatively rare Grass Owl in North Qld reminded me of my only encounter with a pair - in captivity at a native animal zoo near Cairns. They had been “rescued” we were told, from a nest site that fell victim to ploughing. [cover photo]

The grass Owl looks similar to the more common Barn Owl, and David had some interesting things to say about the latter. The Barn Owl in particular, seems to breed somewhat frantically during plague eruptions of its principle prey, mice. As mouse plagues tend to end fairly quickly, this strategy results in many young owls starving to death.

Another revelation was that Barn Owls apparently have vision extending into the infra-red band. David became convinced of this after a session with a pair at a nest hollow, when he set up an infra-red beam to capture 'in flight' photos as the owls approached the nest. After the first shots, the owls got wise and approached from a different direction. Each time the beam was moved, the owls evaded it, even resorting to landing further up the trunk and walking down to the nest. Research on captive birds may

resolve this, but it stands to reason that infra-red vision would be a huge advantage to a night hunter, as the body heat from prey would render them visible in the dark.

There is some research, summarised recently in an article by Marilyn Hewish (Geelong Naturalist, April 09) which indicates that some owls at least, actually have limited night vision, and memorise their way around obstacles in their territory. It is noted that barn owls and grass owls move about and prefer open areas (more available light) compared to the sedentary habits of owls which occupy limited territories and habitual perches in forests. David is not convinced that their night vision isn't vastly superior to ours, especially the Ninox genus (hawk owls), which have larger and more efficient eyes than Tyto (barn owls). These eyes are not able to swivel like ours, and this enables the iris to open to the full size of the "window" which gives them the characteristic "stare". The lack of eye movement is compensated by a remarkably rubbery neck. With large eyeballs (in the Barking Owl for instance, larger than humans) this must make for very effective sight. Photographers know the value of an extra stop or two of aperture. It can double to quadruple the cost of a lens!

Unlike other birds, the forward vision of owls of course gives them stereo vision like us, enabling much more accurate estimation of distance as well as increased night efficiency. However, David recounted cases where young owls were blind in one eye, presumably from a sibling fight or a first flight crash (which seems to be a normal event) They did not appear to be handicapped in getting about with one eye.

Great eyesight, acute hearing, and silent flight are the special attributes of the owls. David Hollands sums up his feelings as follows:

"Out in the bush at night, I sometimes put my eyesight to the test by trying to find my way without the aid of a torch. It rarely takes long to show up the deficiencies as unseen vines whip my face, invisible roots trip my feet, black trunks block my course and I blunder off the track which seems so obvious by torch or daylight. My hearing rarely detects the movements of any animal smaller than a kangaroo or wombat while my thunderous progress is surely broadcast to every creature in the area."

"Through this same medium the owls sail with total assurance, never so much as flicking a leaf in their silent passage through the forest and attuned to the slightest squeak or rattle which may come from a potential victim. Such powers verge almost on the supernatural and, even when some of the physiological explanations are known, I still find myself filled with wonder at the owls' unaided mastery of the night."

Noel Young

## PLANTING OUT

Tender white roots  
Protrude thread-like  
From the black plastic womb.  
*Acacia paradoxa*  
Selected from the nursery.

Cymbal crash of  
Metal on stone  
Splits the silence  
As I rip  
The resistant earth,  
Its redolence released.

Scooped soil  
Like tawny talcum,  
Pours back  
To its nesting place.

I scoop again,  
Catch it  
Mounded behind  
The mattock-head.

The hole, filled  
With tank water,  
Sucks greedily.

Gently I ease the plant from its tube,  
Playing midwife to a seedling;  
Place the new-born  
In its prepared crib,  
Secure it with earth blanket.

I leave fingerprints  
On the landscape.

**Natalie de Maccus**

# Breaking the Curse of the Chronic Dipper

By Chris Timewell

## Swift Parrot & Regent Honeyeater Survey Weekend – 16-17 May 2009

**Dip** / *The most dreaded term in the twitching vocabulary; to miss out on a bird you have been looking for* (From Dooley, 2007, 'Anoraks to Zitting Cisticolas.' Published by Allen and Unwin).

Coordinated national volunteer surveys for Swift Parrots (*Lathamus discolor*) and Regent Honeyeaters (*Anthochaera phygia*) began in 1995. Every year, over weekends in May and August, bird-watchers and other naturalists across south-eastern mainland Australia are encouraged to search for these two threatened bird species. Swift Parrots (SP), which breed in Tasmania and migrate to the mainland during the winter months for foraging, are regular and relatively well-known visitors to the local area although the numbers seen can alter dramatically from year to year. Regent Honeyeaters (RH) may once have been regular visitors to the local area, but have declined massively across their entire distribution to the point where they are now rarely recorded within Victoria (with observations becoming increasingly scarce in their last remaining semi-regular Victorian haunts within the Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park). However, with the seemingly successful release of ~25 captive-bred RHs at Chiltern in 2008, and more releases anticipated to follow in future years, RHs may well begin to reclaim some of their former distribution across central Victoria.

Although a large number of organizations are always involved, the responsibility for co-ordination of these annual SP-RH surveys has for many years sat with the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation. This year Birds Australia has taken on this role as an integrated part of their new Woodland Bird Conservation project. This has resulted in some slight changes to the SP-RH survey forms, the most noticeable being the request to include all other birds species seen at a site, not just the nectar and lerp feeders. As always, completed survey forms are encouraged for all sites visited irrespective of whether either species were seen. Each year more than 1,000 completed forms are submitted from locations ranging from approximately Adelaide through to southern Queensland.

While I cannot claim to have been involved in every survey as a volunteer, I try my best to get in at least one of the survey weekends every year. It is very satisfying being able to contribute to a national project, especially when it involves bird-watching. However, the approach of the SP / RH



survey weekend fills me with dread as much as it does anticipation. I am certain that I have completed more survey forms than any other birdwatcher for a total of zero SP or RH observations. While I agree that it is still very important to find out where they're *not* occurring, it would be nice to see them every now and then. Even just a glimpse. Granted, I have usually been looking in places where an observation of either species would be an outstanding find. The lost kingdom of Swifties and Regents. A cripple of a location. I have looked unsuccessfully in the Strzelecki Ranges and elsewhere in South Gippsland, the Pines (near Frankston), Vincentia (near Jervis Bay), heathy woodland remnants around Westernport Bay, the Brisbane Ranges National Park; as well as many sudden stops of the car at random flowering trees I happen to pass (including urban parks, nature strips and private gardens).

But this year would be different. This year would involve a change of tactics. This year I would be in a Swiftie hotspot, I would be near the "famous" Newstead RH location of 2003, and would join the combined search power and experience of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists.

**Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May.** From our 8.30am rendezvous at the octopus building on Forest St, three eager birdwatchers piled into the car of John Alexander, our leader for the day. The cold weather, and my confession of a poor history of SP-RH searching, didn't appear to dampen any spirits. Our first stop was at a small bushland remnant off Muckleford School Rd, where SP had been reported a couple of weeks earlier. Despite a low to moderate level of flowering in many of the Grey Box trees, there were very few honeyeaters about, and no sign of our target species. After a quick but thorough search, we jumped back into the car and continued westwards. We'd only made it a couple of kilometres further along when we were attracted by a high level of bird activity in some large old flowering eucalypts along the roadside. An enjoyable 20 minutes or so was spent watching a range of nectivorous birds (e.g. large numbers of White-naped Honeyeaters, plus Brown-headed, White-plumed, and Fuscous Honeyeaters, Red Wattlebirds and more) as well as a good variety of other woodland species (e.g. Golden Whistler, Varied Sitella, Weebill, many thornbills). Still no SP or RH, but our hearts were pumping just a little faster.

We next went to the Muckleford Nature Conservation Reserve off Pullans Rd, at a locality known locally as "Quince Trees". There was a different array of dominant eucalypts here with a patchy flowering intensity, but no SP or RH. Despite this, we were thrilled by a close viewing (albeit quick) of a **Rose Robin**, a species rarely seen in the local area. A morning tea break at the historic Red, White and Blue Mine site was notable only for its almost complete absence of birds of any kind. No Red Ironbarks were

flowering here, and there were very few buds or other evidence that there would be much ironbark flowering at all this winter. We finished our search at a few secret locations near John's house. Unfortunately, they were so secret that even the SP and RH couldn't find them. Overall, a very enjoyable morning was had by all, and many thanks to John for his enthusiastic leadership.

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May.** Four club members, and three young eager children met Debbie Worland in the car park of the Castlemaine Golf Club (alongside the Pyrenees Hwy) at 8.30am. Debbie's intensive studies at this site over recent years have added greatly to the knowledge of SP behaviour, feeding ecology and habitat requirements. In addition to undertaking the SP-RH surveys, two of our group filmed interviews with Debbie that will be incorporated with Debbie's own extensive video footage to produce a documentary on the Swift Parrots.

Despite the unexpected presence of large numbers of golfers (pennant competition day), Debbie led us on a safe stroll along the boundaries of the golf course. Nice sightings of Crested Shrike-tits, New Holland Honeyeaters and White-winged Choughs whetted our appetites for more. The children's early suggestions that we should be watching out for monkeys and elephants were treated with good humour, although deep down I feared that, with my luck, these exotic beasts were just as likely to be seen as our target species.

When we finally reached the spot where SP are often seen, there were lots of interesting birds about, including numerous common honeyeaters and a couple of Purple-crowned Lorikeets. An obliging group of ground-foraging Spotted Pardalotes allowed the children to creep up to within a couple of metres for a close viewing. Interviews with Debbie were about to commence when her ears pricked up. "Swift Parrots calling. Two or more. That way." With our eyes, ears and binoculars, we spent many minutes scanning a big flowering tree and surrounding areas from where their calls had come. No luck. With increasing desperation, I continued scanning the nearby areas while Debbie went back to being interviewed. And suddenly there they were. Two SP foraging in a small flowering eucalypt. Rejoice! I tried signalling to the others while not disturbing the interview or the birds. Unfortunately, the birds decided to fly off into the adjacent private land just as the interview ended and I had managed to get their attention.

No further SP were seen, but a couple were heard again in the adjacent inaccessible private land. On the short walk back to the car-park we shared SP stories from seasons past. Saying our goodbyes, a Blue-faced Honeyeater swooped down through the middle of our group and then flew off down the road. An exhilarating local rarity to cap off the weekend.

Many thanks to Debbie for her willingness to share her knowledge and experience of the site.

All in all, a terrific weekend. For once, I didn't entirely dip out on the target species. It's time now to get back into training for the next round of SP-RH surveys over the weekend of 1-2 August 2009. Hope to see you there.

## **A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE RETURN FROM SMITHS REEF**

Natalie de Maccus

Not so funny really. It could have had serious repercussions. But as is said in the classics "All's well that ends well".

Richard Piesse had told us that Autumn Greenhoods were flowering at Smiths Reef and that it would be well worth the trip to see them. He did issue a warning – that DSE were planning a burn in the area. So it would be wise to check with the powers that be before venturing out there.

Fortuitously John and I had to make a trip to Bendigo on the Thursday, two days prior to the field trip. Given that DSE office is located at Epsom (not far from where we were headed) it seemed a good idea to visit the office in person rather than making phone enquiries. However, although the receptionist was very helpful, she could only confirm that the area in question was to be burned but could not establish whether or not it had been burned.

John and I decided the best solution was to check out the area ourselves. This we did on the way home and found that it was still intact. We then kept our fingers crossed to ward off the fire gods on Friday and hoped that DSE didn't burn on weekends.

On Saturday George was elected (or bullied by me into being) leader because Richard had told him where to find the orchids. Margaret Lee, who was waiting for us at the octopus, after the field trip intended travelling to her place at Avoca. Geraldine travelled with her to Smiths Reef on the basis that she, Geraldine, could get a lift home in another car. This having been established, our little band set off.

We stopped at Gowar School where a few birds were seen and heard. Plants identified at this location were Spreading Wattle *Acacia genistifolia*, Cranberry Heath *Astroloma humifusum*, Red-tip(?) Greenhood and/or Tiny Greenhood and Midge Orchids (finished flowering and beginning to seed).





Autumn Greenhood *Pterostylis* sp affinis *revoluta*



Midge Orchid *Corunastylis* sp.



Red-tip(?) Greenhood *Pterostylis* sp affinis *parviflora*



Parson's Bands *Eriochilus cucullatus*

All photos by Noel Young on May 9<sup>th</sup> at Smiths Reef dam

Second stop was at Smith's Reef where, true to Richard's directions, George found the Autumn Greenhoods *Pterostylis revoluta*. We were also rewarded with Parson's Bands *Eriochilus cucullatus*, Tall Greenhoods *Pterostylis melagramma* and Sticky Everlastings *Xerochrysum viscosum* (almost finished flowering). George then took us to the location of Flame Heath *Astroloma conostephioides* which were flowering profusely.

For the return journey Geraldine and I travelled with Denis Hurley, who offered to lead Margaret to Maldon, whence she knew her way to Avoca. We were last to leave because Geraldine needed to transfer her gear to Denis's car. Having arrived at Maldon and seen Margaret on the right road to Avoca we set sail for home. On returning to the Octopus Denis parked behind Geraldine's and my vehicles. Whereupon Denis's car died. No amount of trying would start it. Denis knew the problem (it had happened once before and was not just a quick call to the RACV job). So Geraldine and I were hemmed in by Denis's deceased vehicle. The three of us pushed said vehicle into a more convenient location so as to allow us to exit. Denis turned down the offer of a lift home.

The moral of this tale is to remember to bring a mobile phone (assuming it to be in range). Had the car expiry occurred while we were still in the bush it could have meant a long, cold walk home.

### **Bird list [N. Y.]**

Gowar school:

Thornbills – Buff rumped, Yellow, and Striated; Scarlet Robin, Grey Shrike-thrush, Willy wagtail, Eastern Rosella.

Smith's Reef dam:

White throated Treecreeper, Superb Blue Wrens, Yellow(?) Thornbill.  
White plumed Honeyeater.

## **On counting birds**

Noel Young

I have been wading through the State Of Australia's Birds report for 2008 hoping to make some summary comments, but it would take a substantial article to do it justice. The report largely deals with trends in a number of threatened species, with reference to geographic areas, and is worth studying in detail if you are interested. About the only quick and dirty comment I could make is that in relation to common and widespread land species, there is significant decline over the last 10 years largely attributed to the drought conditions, especially notable in the Murray – Darling basin. The dry conditions exacerbate the lack of connectivity of vegetation.

In relation to this, it is interesting to look at the local statistics from our annual bird count over the last three years, supplied by Chris Morris. There is no discernible statistical trend

	2006	2007	2008
Species	91	92	107
Total number	2601	1756	2620

## Observations

- ◆ 23<sup>rd</sup> May: Four (very shy) White naped Honeyeater, four Brown headed Honeyeater, Grey Fantail, a pair of Scarlet Robins and an Eastern Spinebill at the bird bath. No Pardalotes seen since the week after the February fire - Denis Hurley
- ◆ A fox making off with a fish food can; and only one Flame Robin seen this year – Nigel Harland
- ◆ A solitary roosting Powerful Owl seen three times in May (Botanical Gardens) – Noel Young
- ◆ Wombat Forest ~40 Y.T. Black Cockatoos – Richard Piesse
- ◆ A pair of Scarlet Robins in the garden, and a large flock of Pied Currawongs near Harcourt – Chris Morris
- ◆ Juvenile Sparrowhawk in the garden – Virginia Bartram
- ◆ Geraldine Harris showed a Striated Pardalote (window kill) and fungus at the meeting.
- ◆ Geoff Harris: Natasha reported two sightings of the Red capped Robin at Muckleford recently
- ◆ John Alexander - a pair of Wedge tails have taken over the nest of Little Eagles.
- ◆ A Barking Owl and a Red capped Robin – Elaine
- ◆ On her recent trip, Rita Mills witnessed a Pied Butcherbird attacking a wily flock of Apostle birds; after five minutes it gave up the chase.
- ◆ 28<sup>th</sup> May: Recent controlled burning has taken out orchids in the Smiths reef track area. Parson's bands seeding up close to Maldon and Flame Heath in the same area looking great after the rain. (This area not burnt) - Denis Hurley

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

# Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

## June 2009

**Fri June 12<sup>th</sup> meeting:** SIMON KENNEDY on Swift Parrot research

**Sat June 13<sup>th</sup> field trip:** Captains Gully

**Fri July 10<sup>th</sup> meeting:** GEOFF NEVILL Threatened species (Orchids)

**Sat July 11<sup>th</sup> field trip:** To be announced

**Sat July 18<sup>th</sup> - KABC Roadside clean-up**

**Fri Aug 14<sup>th</sup> meeting:** MICHAEL MARMACH Bogong High Plains

### VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

**General meetings** - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.

**Field Trips** - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

**Business meetings** - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Natalies; 65 Johnstone Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

### Subscriptions for 2009

Ordinary membership: Single \$27, Family \$35

Pensioner or student: Single \$24, Family \$29

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

### 2009 Committee

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